





















THE SHOW STARTED ON THE SIDEWALK

S. Charles Lee

Interviewed by Martha Valentine

Completed under the auspices  
of the  
Oral History Program  
University of California  
Los Angeles

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

### PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: September 5, 1899, Chicago, Illinois.

Education: Lake Technical High School, Chicago; Chicago Technical College, Chicago; Armour Institute of Technology, Chicago; Chicago Art Institute, Chicago.

Spouses: Married Miriam Zelda Aisenstein, 1927, one child; married Hylda Moss, 1966.

### MAJOR PROJECTS:

1925-26	Tower Theatre, Los Angeles
1928	Motion Picture Producers Association Building, Los Angeles
1929	Fox Wilshire Theatre, Beverly Hills
1930	Los Angeles Theatre, Los Angeles Fox Theatre, Bakersfield, California
1931	Fox Florence Theatre, Los Angeles Fox Phoenix Theatre, Phoenix, Arizona
1934	KHJ radio studio, Los Angeles Vogue Theatre, Los Angeles Hotel del Tahquitz, Palm Springs, California
1935	Max Factor Building, Los Angeles Municipal Light, Water and Power Building, Los Angeles
1936	Hermosa Theatre, Hermosa Beach, California Stockton Theatre, Stockton, California Senator Theatre, Oakland, California





Grand Lake Theatre, Oakland, California  
 West Coast Boulevard Theatre, Los Angeles  
 Anaheim Theatre, Anaheim, California  
 El Capitan Theatre, San Francisco  
 West Coast Vermont Theatre, Los Angeles  
 Franks Mausoleum, Chicago

1937 Bruin Theatre, Los Angeles

1938 La Reina Theatre, Sherman Oaks, California

1939 Academy Theatre, Inglewood, California  
 Tumbleweed Theatre (demolished), El Monte, California

1940 Tower Bowl, San Diego

1941 Vogue Theatre, Oxnard, California  
 Mayfair Theatre, Ventura, California  
 Fremont Theatre, San Luis Obispo, California  
 Mayfair Theatre, Forest Hills, New York

1946 Miami Theatre, Miami

1947 La Tijera Theatre, Los Angeles

1948 Holly Park, Gardena, California

1952 Century Industrial Park, Los Angeles

#### PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS:

Private practice in Los Angeles since 1922.

Society of American Registered Architects.

#### PUBLICATIONS:

**Los Angeles Blue Book of Land Values**, ca. 1924-28.



"The Influence of West Coast Designers on the Modern Theatre," in Helen M. Stote (ed.), **The Motion Picture Theatre** (New York: Society of Motion Picture Engineers, Inc., 1948, 32-39).

#### HONORS:

Emeritus Senior Certificate of the National Council of Architectural Registration Board, 1974.

Synergy Award, Society of American Registered Architects, 1980.

Light Award, Braille Institute of America, 1986.

Named vice consul of the Republic of Panama to Beverly Hills, 1963; received Presidential Medal, "Order of Vasco Nuñez Balboa," from the Republic of Panama, 1968; named consul of the Republic of Panama to Beverly Hills, 1974.

#### COMMUNITY AFFILIATIONS:

Airplane Pilots and Owners Association, OX5 Club.

Braille Institute of America, member of board of directors, 1958 to present; vice-president, treasurer, and chair of the Plant and Buildings Committee.

Cedars-Sinai Medical Center Eye Clinic, major contributor.

Los Angeles Consular Corps, treasurer for four years.





## INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

Martha Valentine, interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; archivist, Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA; B.A., American History, California State University, Northridge; Ph.D. candidate, UCLA School of Architecture and Urban Planning.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Lee's office, Beverly Hills, California.

Dates: September 12, September 24, October 8, November 20, December 18, 1985; January 20, January 30, February 28, March 31, May 19, 1986.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: Interview sessions were conducted in the afternoon. Each session lasted approximately two hours. A total of two and one half hours of conversation was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Lee and Valentine.

### CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

Valentine conducted extensive research on Lee and his work for her dissertation. She also catalogued the Lee Collection in the Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, UCLA.

The interview format is chronological. The interview covers Lee's childhood and education, the milestones of his architectural career, and his community involvement.

Mr. Lee maintained control of the tape recorder during the interview sessions. He turned off the tape recorder for most of Valentine's questions as he wished to think about his answers before resuming. The amount of interview recorded in each session is far less than the total length of time Valentine and Lee spent together. In many cases, Lee chose not to answer Valentine's off-mike questions, or came back to them later after further off-mike discussion.



#### EDITING:

Teresa Barnett edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript against the original tape recordings and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, spelling, and verified proper nouns. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed. The final manuscript remains in the same order as the taped material.

In October 1986, the edited transcript was submitted to Lee along with a list of queries and names requiring identification. He returned the approved transcript in December of the same year. Lee made only a few corrections for clarity and spelling.

Richard Cándida Smith, principal editor, and Martha Valentine compiled the index, table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history.

#### SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tapes of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of the permanent, noncurrent records of the university. Interview records and research materials are on file in the office of the Oral History Program.









TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 12, 1985

LEE: This is S. Charles Lee talking. I'm being interviewed by Maggie [Martha] Valentine of UCLA at my office at 258 South Beverly Drive in Beverly Hills on September 12, 1985. Ms. Valentine, what's your first question?

VALENTINE: I'd like you to tell us something about your family background, where your parents are from.

LEE: All right. My father was born in Springfield, Missouri, in 1865, and my mother was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1870. She was a very little girl when her family decided to go to Chicago. It was just after the Chicago fire. They traveled partway by covered wagon and partway on the new railroad that had just been partially completed. After being in Chicago for a short while and subject to the ravages of the Chicago fire, my mother's parents, whose name was Stiller, decided to buy a furniture store. The furniture store was named Goldstein's and had a very handsome sign over the front entrance. They found it would cost too much to change the sign, so instead of being called the Stiller family, they were known in Chicago as the Goldsteins. My mother went through school under the name of Hattie Goldstein, but their name was Stiller. When I was in business outside the United States, it was the custom in Latin America, probably still is, to use the



initials of the mother's family name at the end of your surname. Therefore, I was known as Charles Lee S., but in the United States, it is S. Charles Lee.

Both of my parents had an extreme reverence for integrity and morality. Although they were not severe church people, they, of course, never denied their religion and they were meticulous that every move they made reflected their character as being beyond reproach.

My father was a traveling salesman for a wholesale ready-to-wear business. In those days, the traveling salesmen would take quite a few trunks of their samples and travel to different cities. In the case of my father, he traveled to the West Coast, which was pretty wild in those days, took my mother along, who was a perfect thirty-six, and used her as a model. When he would get to a town-- which were, in many cases, were rather small and had peculiar names like Walla Walla, Washington, which I remembered writing to--and he would go into the major department stores, or ready-to-wear stores and invite the buyers to come over to his hotel room and would show them the line of merchandise and take their orders. He was a very good salesman and well regarded in the industry.

The fact that he was in this business was probably the reason of my first introduction into architecture. It took place as follows: When my father was in Chicago, not



traveling, he would work in the factory with designers telling them what he thought his customers would want. As a youngster, I used to go to the factory with him and watch what was going on. This led me to observe the method that they used in manufacturing garments, which was quite wasteful. Sewing machines in those days were built in banks that had probably one motor operating twenty-five or thirty machines. They would have a system of belts going to a traveling shaft that had pulleys built over each machine, and there were belts that would go from these pulleys to the machines. This was the method of machine-operated sewing machines. They also had a system of bringing in the piece goods in big rolls, spreading it on tables, and a man would cut the patterns with big shears. I found that the system of passing the cut materials from one department to another was very complicated: they had little boys pulling baskets around the factory all day long from one station to the other.

I then cut out paper models of the machines and the tables that they were using. I measured the factory area and made a drawing of the floor area, and then I set the tables and machines up in my models and brought them to the superintendent at the factory. At this point, I was about fifteen or sixteen years old. The superintendents were so impressed that they shut down the factory and redesigned



the machinery to fit the models that I had made. Because of this, many of the other manufacturers, who seem to concentrate in the same district in the Loop in Chicago, began talking about what I had done, and my services became in demand.

At one time, having heard my father discuss the fact that he was selling wholesale, I asked him the question as to what the difference was between wholesale and retail. He said, "Well, I'll show you the difference," and with that he took me down to a cigar store. Cigars were then selling by the box at about three cents apiece and retail at five cents apiece. So my father said, "I'm going to loan you five dollars and you're going in the cigar business. But you have to take care of them and the humidor and keep the proper humidity, and I will buy them from you at five cents apiece." After the boxes of cigars were gone, he said, "Now, pay me back the five dollars that I loaned you," which I did, and I found myself with a profit. He said, "That's the difference between wholesale and retail."

VALENTINE: It's a good lesson.

LEE: Okay. Following this experience, I found out that I could buy eggs from a farmer by the case and sell them to households by the dozen. I subsequently ordered a case of fresh eggs and delivered them from door to door and had





quite a list of customers. I also became a salesman for the **Saturday Evening Post** when it first came out, buying them fifty at a time and selling them at five cents apiece. I was always in some kind of a business. I learned that it was necessary to care for your merchandise, as I had one horrible experience. It was during the wintertime and I had a case of eggs which I kept on the back porch of our apartment in Chicago. We had a big freeze that night and half of my eggs froze, and I was almost ruined financially.

On one of my parents' extended trips, they took me by train to a small town and placed me in a military school--I believe it was called the Fox River Military Academy--for a semester while they were traveling the West Coast. At this time I seemed to have developed the faculty of seeing everything in plan. On a weekend vacation, I visited an aunt who lived in a small town in Illinois and spent the weekend at her house. I never was in that town after that, but thirty years later I met this relative on the West Coast and drew them a picture of the plan of their house. They were amazed, and so was I, that I could remember that plan so well. I believe there's an interesting psychological reaction that you train yourself to do when you are young, and although I could remember the plan of this house for thirty years, I could not remember what my



aunt and uncle looked like. I have never been able to remember anyone's face, and their names practically always escape me. I remember when I was studying at the Art Institute [of Chicago] and had live art classes, I could draw the models, but I could never put in a face.

Probably I should have started this narrative by telling you that I was born in Chicago, September 5, 1899, and now at this date I'm eighty-six years old. I'm still active in the office; I go there every day. And because I am a vice-president of the Braille Institute for the Blind, where I have been on the board for twenty-seven years, I'm in charge of their properties, and this takes practically half a day, every day, to manage.

To continue with the encouragement my parents gave me, they recognized that I had the faculty of working with tools and they gave me every encouragement. In Chicago at that time, which is probably 1913 or '14, they let me have a workshop in my bedroom. I had a lathe, a band saw, and a power saw, all controlled by motors that I had scrounged some way or another. There were times when I had six or eight inches of shavings on the floor, which they did not disturb, but of course had me clean up on occasions. But I was allowed to build whatever I wanted to build in that room.



I had a sister who was seven years my senior. Her name was Hazel. Because there was such a difference in our ages, we had different friends. My mother's name was Hattie; my father's name was Julius, which he disliked very much, and he was called "Billy" all his life and was happy with that.

I was in grade school in Chicago when the board of education decided to try a pre-vocational experiment. They chose certain students that had particular facilities in vocational work and sent them to Lake Technical High School, where they had complete shops of all kinds. I was selected as one of these experimental students and went through all of their vocational courses, even to the extent of making iron castings and using a steam trip hammer. I graduated from this course and this high school at a very early age.

At about this time of my life, my parents had a meeting, which we called a family meeting, and they discussed with me what I would like to make of my life in later years. One of the suggestions was that I take mechanical engineering. I visualized a mechanical engineer as sitting at a drawing board from eight in the morning till five at night, and this was not too encouraging to me. They had a friend who was an architect named Henry Newhouse who was very successful. They used him as a role



model, and I quite agreed that I would devote my life and attentions to becoming an architect. I later was hired by Henry Newhouse, worked for him for some time, and we became very good friends until he died. When I was living on the West Coast and he made a trip to that part of the United States, he would always visit me. I also had, while I was still in Chicago, helped his son through college by tutoring him on various subjects.

My parents investigated and decided that it would be good that I would go to the Chicago Technical College, which had an intensive architectural and engineering school. I graduated from this college at the top of my class, and at that time I was eighteen. There was an announcement by the Chicago park authorities that they were holding examinations for senior architect. One of the professors of the college recommended that I take the examination, although you were supposed to be twenty-one years old, as this was a civil service position. I took the examination, stating on my application that I was twenty-one, passed the examination at the top of the list, and was appointed senior architect for the South Park Board.

During the period that I was working at the board, World War I was in progress and conditions became very complicated for me because there were many draftsmen junior





to me that had draft cards and I didn't. So when the heat became too great, I decided to join the navy. I went to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and enlisted there and soon earned the rank of carpenter's mate and was assigned to the engineering department, where I designed cantonments and navy buildings practically the whole time I was there except about a month before the war ended I transferred into the motorcycle dispatch regiment. As we carried messages from place to place in those days, they did not have walkie-talkies or other electronic arrangements. I remember while I was there, there was a false announcement that the armistice had been signed three days before the actual signing, and I was sent on my motorcycle to the front gates to prevent the sailors from leaving without permission or documents. [tape recorder off]

Some of my early hobbies were quite constructive and educational. Between the age of fourteen and eighteen, I built three automobiles. The earliest one was a set of wheels and a gasoline engine that had an external flywheel. I've never seen one before or since. It was called a Yale. I built a wooden frame and I built this automobile on the third floor of our apartment that I had mentioned before. I used this for quite some time, and then a friend of my father's who was in the salvage business told my father that he had bought a defunct



automobile company's stock of parts, and if I wanted to build another automobile, he would give me a space in his warehouse and I could select the parts that I wanted. I did build another automobile. This one had a four-cylinder engine and a standard transmission. Later I took up automobile racing at Roby, Indiana, and built another car using basic Ford parts modified for racing purposes. This is an automobile that I drove to California in 1921, although I had built it much earlier. I'll have more to say about this.

I also became interested in radio. This was before they had voice, and everything was operated by dots and dashes. I built the set from start to finish, using what they called a galena detector, and made tuning coils by wrapping wire on mailing tubes. It was quite successful and I obtained the license of 9DH at the age of fifteen. Recently, I applied for a new license to which I was entitled, which they gave to anyone over the age of seventy-five who had been licensed as early as I had, and the requirement was that I copy fifteen words a minute. This speed is too fast for me at this age, although I can still copy the code and have done so during my flying experience, using the code for all navigational purposes.

After the armistice was signed to World War I, the government issued an order that anyone going back to school



would get an early discharge. At this point, I decided to take a postgraduate course in architecture at the Chicago school of architecture [Department of Architecture] which was part of Armour Institute [of Technology]. The way it operated was that our engineering classes were held in the mornings at about Thirty-fifth Street, and at noon we would take the elevated downtown and have the afternoon classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. They were held up in the skylight area between the trusses of the roof.

I forgot to mention, another experience while at Great Lakes was the horrendous flu epidemic which raged through the country. We were sleeping in hammocks and barracks, and there were literally dozens of hammocks from which people fell and died. They drafted members of our group, because we were rated as carpenter's mates, to nail up boxes, boxed coffins. There were thousands of deaths in the Great Lakes area. I was given an honorable discharge from the navy in 1919.

The Art Institute embraced the Beaux Arts program, where our designs were reviewed in Paris at the Beaux Arts Institute [Ecole des Beaux-Arts], and I was awarded two honorable mentions for my work. I took extra classes in freehand at night at the Art Institute. We also had classes in sculpturing using clay and making mostly architectural ornaments.



After graduating from the Chicago School of Architecture, I went to work for Rapp and Rapp, the outstanding theater architects of their day. I was assigned to their design department and took programs directly from the Rapps and developed preliminary and extensive floor plans. I mentioned before, this was a very logical assignment for me because I see everything in plan and can take a vacant lot and see the building on it almost instantly. The Rapp office was a wonderful institution having many experts on their staff. I learned a lot about theater design when I was there, and during that time I took the examination for architect in the state of Illinois. It was a three-day examination in architecture and engineering, which I passed on the first trial.

On one of the trips that my parents made to the West Coast, they took me along, and although I didn't stay more than a day or two and went back to Chicago, I always had the idea that I would like to come back to the West Coast. While I was still employed by Rapp and Rapp, I decided to take a vacation to go to the West Coast, which I drove to in the car that I had built for racing on the Roby track. I did not mention that while I was going to school I insisted on paying my own expenses and supported myself by playing a banjo in an orchestra, usually on weekends, where I would make five dollars a night playing in





questionable places. [laughter] So when I decided to drive to the West Coast, I had not accumulated too much into my savings account, and I advertised for someone to drive with me and help pay expenses. This ad was answered by a GI who was still in uniform, although discharged, and he contributed to the cost of gasoline. In those days there were not many good roads between Chicago and the West Coast. Particularly at the area between Yuma [Arizona] and El Centro [California] there were no roads whatsoever across the desert. But there was a track that had been made by using railroad ties, and the space in between the ties was filled with sand. The ties kept the sand from shifting. Somewhere between Yuma and El Centro, my car, having been built for racing and not for this kind of road, practically fell apart. Some kindly motorist with several people aboard offered to tow me to El Centro for which I was grateful, and we became such good friends that we kept in touch with each other for many years and eventually I built a house for them.

VALENTINE: Who was that? What was his name?

LEE: I don't remember. [laughter] Two kids, you know. He was in uniform, this fellow. I don't remember what his name is. [The name of the good samaritan is J. W. Sherman.]

Where was I? I rented a space in a garage and a room



over the garage and proceeded to take the car apart and rebuild it. This was in El Centro, California. I was running short of funds and my companion was very close with his budgets. We would eat at the cheapest restaurant in town and then spend the evenings at the beautiful Barbara Worth Hotel, which was the largest hotel between San Diego and Phoenix. That was really the oasis of the desert. In this hotel lobby were ticker tapes and a congregation of produce buyers from California who would buy the farm merchandise and ship it to Chicago and New York. The pricing was all done in this hotel lobby. They also had very big poker games, had stacks of money on the table, and I always had a good time watching these games, although, of course, not participating. The interesting part of this experience is that I eventually bought the Barbara Worth Hotel.

Interesting highlights on my drive across the country in those days: One of the places I stopped at was called Silver City [New Mexico]. I rented a room from an elderly lady, as there was no hotel in that town, and she told us very interesting stories of how Silver City was once a great mining town and her deceased husband had worked in these mines, which were over six hundred feet deep. Because of a water condition that became very complicated, the type of pumps that they had couldn't keep the mine dry,



and the mines were abandoned, although the whole town is honeycombed with silver tunnels. I presume that when silver reached the very high prices that they did a few years ago, such as fifty dollars an ounce, they could have afforded to reopen this mine, although the price did not stay there too long.

Okay. After my car was repaired, I traveled to San Diego and then northward to Los Angeles. I noticed that there were many lemon groves with the trees cut down for no apparent reason. I stopped and asked one of the farmers why this was true, and he explained that lemons were being imported from Latin America without duty. It did not pay to pick the lemons, so they cut the trees down to keep the ground from being soured.

When I arrived in Los Angeles, I found my way to the house of an aunt, my father's sister, who was an unmarried lady living in Venice. She was happy to see me and put the two of us up for several days. Venice was an interesting place in those days, having been built by a subdivider who called it Venice and had the major buildings designed in plaster with the Venetian type of architecture. On the main part of town was a large body of water from which there were quite a few canals. They had a bridge over one of the canals called The Bridge of Sighs. I eventually rented a small apartment in Venice on a street which they



then called the Speedway. It was called the Speedway because it was barely wide enough for two cars to pass and the speed limit there was approximately seven miles an hour. It was a horrible place.

Transportation from Venice to Los Angeles was principally by "red car." There were big open spaces between Venice or Santa Monica and Los Angeles. Beverly Hills was practically nonexistent, and it was a long trip by car. There was one area called Culver City that was a big sand dune and was being developed by a man named Harry Culver. They would have a lecture about Culver City in downtown Los Angeles, offer people a free lunch and a ride to and from Culver City. When they would get to what they called Culver City, they had a big tent and would try to get hundreds of people into that tent, give them sandwiches and a lecture about the virtues of Culver City. Even Harry Culver didn't think it would turn out the way it is now. El Segundo, which is also in the general area, was one big sand dune. There was a little gasoline-cracking plant and practically nothing else.

At the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax [Avenue] was Rogers airport. I bought a ride from this airport for five dollars in a World War I Jenny. On this airport they had a pie wagon which was a converted covered-wagon type of affair. They'd taken the wheels off and





blocked it up on blocks and they had a wood stove. It was run by a mother and father and son. The son would wash the dishes, the father did the serving, and the mother did the cooking. She made marvelous pies. Eventually, from this pie wagon, they graduated into a restaurant, which became a chain later, and I've lost track of it since then.

VALENTINE: Do you remember the name of it?

LEE: I think it was Newlands. Where the Beverly Wilshire Hotel is at the present time was a wooden automobile race track. I went to an automobile race there. It was subsequently torn down. The Beverly Wilshire Hotel was built as an apartment building. However, when I arrived in Venice around December, 1921, and in early 1922, I met a very successful businessman named Walter G. McCarty. He was extremely astute and he formed a firm called McCarty, Vaughan, and Evans. They had an option to purchase seventy-two acres of land from Wilshire Boulevard to the first street south. Mr. McCarty invited me to join them, and I sold my automobile and invested the money that I got from that in his program. The land was purchased for seventy-five hundred dollars an acre, which was the highest price ever paid for acreage up to that time in any subdivision in the Los Angeles area.

We proceeded to subdivide the land, and I built an office for them which included a drafting room for myself,



and I set up shop as an architect at that location. [tape recorder off] Wilshire Boulevard at that time was just a two-lane highway and it had a dirt edge. It was contemplated to widen Wilshire Boulevard, and they drove stakes to the edge of the dirt and put signs up, "Wilshire Boulevard to be widened to this point." On Sundays and holidays, they would have a tractor across Wilshire Boulevard and stop all the traffic. Then salesmen would jump on the running boards of the cars and the salesmen would show them through the dirt streets of the subdivision and sell them lots. As part of the sales pitch, they would bring them into the office and introduce them to "Mr. Lee," who would draw plans for any size house for a hundred dollars. Therefore, they sold lots and I sold architectural plans. This was really the beginning of my commercial career, as I had come here principally for a vacation, and now it looked like I was going to stay.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 24, 1985

LEE: This is Tuesday, September 24, 1985, Maggie [Martha] Valentine interviewing architect S. Charles Lee at his office in Beverly Hills.

VALENTINE: When last we talked, you had just decided to stay in Los Angeles, but I'm wondering, before we get to that, what impact the city of Chicago and people like Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan had on your ideas and your later work.

LEE: Well, Frank Lloyd Wright was one of my favorites. I was really influenced more by Louis Sullivan, who also lectured at the Chicago school of architecture [Armour Institute of Technology, Department of Architecture]. I think I was born to be a modernist, and I experimented in this point of view, but not to the extent of Neutra and his school, chiefly because I submitted some plans of this type of architecture to the banks for financing and in those days they had a positive rule against financing any houses of this type. Also, the trend in Southern California at that time for housing was definitely of the Mediterranean, the Spanish and Mexican influence. Some subdivisions even had a restriction against anything except a Spanish tile roof, which of course dictated the whole concept of the architectural approach. Other than this, when I got into



commercial work, I soon got into the theatrical field, and my point of view of theatrical architecture was to create the psychology of a theater even in an approach to the building. In the early days of my practice, I created the saying that "The show starts on the sidewalk."

My early commissions were small houses and duplexes. While I was situated in the real estate office with my one-man drafting room, I decided I was not pleased with the fact that the street and sidewalk improvements were being put in by one of the brothers of a member of the real estate syndicate without any competitive bids. As I had used all of my money to buy into this syndicate, I had nowhere to go, except they offered to buy me out at a profit and I sold my interest and immediately bought a lot for a duplex in the then completely vacant area of La Brea [Avenue] and Santa Monica Boulevard. I thought I had bought a lot in an area that would become a very exclusive residential area. When I noticed a large excavation in the general neighborhood and upon investigation found out it was to be a huge gas tank, I then drew plans for a duplex on the property and was able to get a loan sufficient to build the building. Upon the completion of this duplex, I was able to trade my equity for a free-and-clear bungalow in Hollywood, which I advertised for sale.





I received a call from a lady and I took her to see the bungalow. She told me that she was the wife of a very important moving picture actor who didn't think she had any business ability, and she asked me if I thought the bungalow was a good buy at the price I was asking, which I confirmed. She immediately took me to her branch bank and told the teller to give me a cashier's check for the full price without going to escrow or getting a deed or having any identification who I was. I, of course, advised her on the proper procedure and prepared a deed for her and gave her clear title. I do not know what became of the property, but I hope she has retained it until the present day, when the forecast of a profit would have taken place.

I made some progress by subcontracting the drafting of plans for other architects to such an extent that I moved my offices to central Los Angeles in the Douglas Building, which was about Third and Spring streets. At that time, it was almost impossible to get a telephone downtown. This, I believe, was in 1923. Through some friends that I had made, I developed enough influence to get a telephone. Although there was a huge black market for a line, I got mine free. I hired an office boy who desired to become a junior draftsman, and, with only this one assistant, I turned out a lot of plans for other architects. Financially, I did all right.



I lived in a hotel on Bunker Hill. I believe my rental was fifteen dollars a month. I used to walk through the Third Street tunnel past Angel's Flight to my office and back. A lunch was about fifteen cents and a Chinese dinner was thirty-five cents.

My father eventually bought a bungalow court. This was in the neighborhood of Western Avenue and Pico Boulevard, which in those days was a very good neighborhood, but it deteriorated rather rapidly after he purchased the property. It was the eventual downfall of his economic status, accelerated also by the failure of a loan institution in Chicago that boasted of a no-loss record of twenty years. During those days, I lived with my parents.

My father was a very kind man and very proud of the fact that he could drive an automobile. Consequently, he picked up any person asking for a ride. On one of his trips he picked up a man and in their conversation learned that he was going into the city to select an architect. Of course, my father drove him directly to my office, which was the beginning of a new commercial clientele. This building was somewhere in Pasadena.

Around this time, I learned of the availability of several blocks of lots in the Carthay Center area and joined forces with two friends to build and sell



duplexes. We were highly successful in this venture, which eventually led to my financial downfall, which I will explain later. I believe we called this group Universal Holding Company and built several apartments.

I recollect several meetings we had at a time we were designing an apartment building in the Hollywood district. In those days, the iceboxes in the kitchen were operated by icemen coming to the apartment and cutting large squares of ice, which he loaded into the apartment iceboxes chiefly through a trap-door-type arrangement into the halls. A block of ice in those days cost from five to fifteen cents. However, it was my point of view that there had been invented an electric icebox, and I suggested that we install these iceboxes in the apartment, which required several days of meetings with partners who did not want to invest in same. I finally prevailed, and it was one of the few apartments in Hollywood with what they then called "Frigidaire." In fact, the word "Frigidaire" became synonymous with the electrically refrigerated iceboxes, even though the name was a commercial article.

It was our arrangement in the Universal Holding Company that I would do the architectural work and my two associates would take care of the outside work. Eventually, they felt that they were contributing more effort than I was and ended our association.



Now I'll come back to the duplex transactions. A duplex in those days cost us approximately \$12,000 to build. That is land and building. We would get a trust deed of about \$10,000, sell the project for \$15,000 or \$16,000 with approximately \$2,000 down, and we would carry the balance, which represented our profits, in a second trust deed. Many years later, at the depths of the Depression, these trust deeds were foreclosed and the building sold on the courthouse steps at \$7,000, \$8,000, or \$9,000. In those days, the law provided that the maker of the trust deed was liable for the deficiency between the remainder of the trust deed and the sale. As I was a signatory on the trust deeds, I had to use all of the available cash that I had to protect my name, even to the extent that I presented a deed to my own residence in lieu on the house that I had built at the corner of Hayworth and Whitworth Avenue, which consisted of a two-story residence for myself and a duplex on the corner that I rented for the purpose of carrying my investment. During these depressed periods, the rental of a three-bedroom duplex was from forty-five to fifty dollars a month, and we usually gave one or two months' concession on a year's lease. No cash for financing was available in those days, and the future for all real estate and buildings was very bleak.





Prior to the period I was just talking about when these foreclosures took place, which was in the thirties, I will go back to some of my other commitments. I moved from the Douglas Building to the new Petroleum Securities Building, where I had a small but well-decorated office and quite a few clients, mostly speculative builders for whom I designed numerous apartment buildings. One of these ventures was the Haddon Hall apartments on Eighth Street opposite the Ambassador Hotel. This was considered deluxe in those days, with central refrigerating systems for the kitchens. This was a complex arrangement of chilling the water with an ammonia process and pumping the water through pipes that were covered by insulation to the various apartments. Expensive to operate and maintain.

The owners of this apartment were two brothers [the Oberndorf brothers], and we became fast friends. One day they told me they had a friend who owned a small theater on Broadway and wanted to build a larger theater with special characteristics and that the two architects he had consulted told him his idea could not be built on the property. His lot was 50' x 150' at the corner of Eighth and Broadway, and his idea was to have commercial stores on Broadway, also on Eighth Street, and a nine hundred-seat theater. I told these brothers that if they would give a dinner party and invite his friend, I would foot the bill



for the dinner party. They liked this idea and arranged a very elaborate affair at the Ambassador Hotel, complete with champagne and caviar.

During the party I was introduced to H. L. Gumbiner, who found out I was an architect and discussed his problem with me. Then and there I made him a proposition that I would prepare all the plans at my expense and guarantee a permit, providing he would pay a standard fee if I was successful. He immediately agreed to this arrangement, and my idea that I developed for the property was approximately as follows: There were two ordinances in effect at that time. One was called a motion picture ordinance, which allowed up to nine hundred seats with masonry walls and a wooden roof. No stage, no balcony. There also was a theater ordinance, which allowed a full stage, balcony, and required class A construction. I prepared plans for a class A building with a balcony, with no stage. When I say "no stage," it was limited to seven feet in depth with no fly loft. In the preparation of these plans, I submitted some thirty-odd variances to the Building and Safety Commission, which they approved because they were all within the scope of the two ordinances. However, when the plans were submitted to the building department for permit, they refused to stamp same. I then appealed to the city attorney, who appeared before the building department and



declared that my point of view was legal and I could force the city to issue a permit, which they did without further complications.

We had several innovations in this theater [Tower Theatre], one of which it was the first theater designed for sound. I have forgotten whether it was Westinghouse or General Electric had developed a system of a phonograph disc synchronized with the film projector and sound horns were located back of the screen. However, no one knew the dimensions of the speakers, which we then called "horns," and preparations could not be made for their final installation. Therefore, when the horns did arrive, they were too big to fit on the stage without cutting a hole in the back wall, which I did. The theater opened with Al Jolson in **The Jazz Singer**, which was one of the all-time greats in box-office receipts.

Mr. Gumbiner, a forward-thinking man, wanted the theater air-conditioned, and little was known about air-conditioning of auditoriums up to this time. We made a contract with the Carrier Company to send engineers from their manufacturing facility to help with the installation. As this required a large machinery room, the owner suggested that the public have a view of this machinery, and from the stair landing from the first floor to the rest rooms in the basement, we installed a window so



the patrons could view the machinery. He also had a metal plaque made over the drinking fountain stating that the water was refrigerated. This was one of his greatest joys.

The owner was so pleased with his project that he presented me with a membership to the Hillcrest Country Club and also gave me a contract to build the Los Angeles Theatre, on property he acquired between Sixth and Seventh on Broadway, which he leased for ninety-nine years from the Fox Chicago Realty Company. As Mr. Gumbiner came from Chicago and was acquainted with the work of Rapp and Rapp, he wanted French Louis XVI influence, which we used throughout the interiors of the Tower Theatre and now he wanted the Los Angeles Theatre to be the outstanding example of this style, to which I agreed. In fact, we took a trip throughout the United States to see every major motion picture theater.

When we came to design the building, we were informed that there was a clause in the underlying property deed providing that during the life of an architect [S. Tilden Norton, architect of record for the Los Angeles Theatre], the son of the former landowner, that he must be the architect for any building on the property. Mr. Gumbiner made an agreement with this architect to pay him a full fee, but he was not to come into the drafting room and only





his name appeared, but no suggestions. I will come back to the Los Angeles Theatre because a very important segment of my life took place before the Tower Theatre.

The year was about 1925. My mother was a friend of the Schwab family, who in those days had a well-known clothing business on Hollywood Boulevard. Mrs. Schwab's sister came to visit her from New York, whom my mother arranged for me to meet, and in April of 1927, married. At this time, the Tower Theatre was in construction, and my new father-in-law, who lived in New York, presented us with tickets to visit him, which was part of our honeymoon excursion. While in New York, I contracted a severe case of influenza. It was almost a month before I returned to Los Angeles, finding the owner of the Tower Theatre in a very unhappy mood, due to the fact that another architect had come on the job and criticized everything that had been done up to that date. It was necessary for me to have chairs and dummies installed and steel wires from the eyes to the various parts of the projected screen to convince the owner that the theater was properly designed. I even moved my drafting room onto the site in an office that I built over the sidewalk so that there could be no reason for any unanswered questions, and luckily we had a happy ending.



TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

OCTOBER 8, 1985

VALENTINE: This is Tuesday, October 8, 1985, Maggie Valentine interviewing architect S. Charles Lee at his office in Beverly Hills. Mr. Lee, last time we talked about the Tower Theatre and before we go on to talk about some of your other theaters, I wonder if you could tell us something about some of the houses you did in the early 1920s.

LEE: Maggie, during the years of '24 and '25 I built numerous houses, four-flats, apartments, and some miscellaneous stores. I believe I told you about the house I built for the interesting man, Mr. W. J. Bailey in Monrovia, who started the Day 'N' Nite water heater company while basking in the sun in Monrovia. I built a double bungalow for J. F. Cullen. I built a residence for Gail McDowell, a residence for Eileen Manning, a residence for Miles Ginburg, a four-flat for Mr. A. Monheimer, a residence for Mr. A. Freidman, a court for Mr. A. H. Larkin, a residence for Mr. and Mrs. J. Goldsmith, apartments for [R.] W. Fiske, a bungalow court for Mr. S. A. Robinson, a residence for Mr. B. W. Marks.

I altered a residence for Mr. and Mrs. Philip Hunt, which they sold and later acquired the property on Cedarhurst Circle where we built quite a large home. Mrs.



Hunt was quite a large person and demanded huge rooms. Nothing seemed large enough for her. Trying to recollect back, I believe the living room was something like thirty-five by sixty feet, probably thirty or thirty-five feet ceiling height. The bedrooms were proportionately large. In fact, it was a huge residence. After they were in the residence for about a year, they sent for me one day and introduced me to a gentleman from Italy who wanted to buy their house. He stated that if he bought the house, he wanted extensive remodeling to same, and I spent a week or ten days going over all the ideas that he had to change the character of the house. He was from Italy and was very knowledgeable about all of the important buildings in Italy. We discussed the various palaces in Venice and important buildings of Rome, and I knew immediately that he had a background of architecture. I told Mr. Hunt that the alterations this gentleman was talking about would run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars and I thought he should check his credit, which Mr. Hunt proceeded to do and later found out that the man was really a member of a very important Italian family and had been in several mental institutions because his hobby was to go around attempting to buy places and having them remodeled such as he was attempting to do here.



I built a residence for Mr. R. W. Fiske, who later had me build an apartment for him. In 1925 I built a small residence for the very important motion picture director Irving Cummings, which he sold and later had me build a larger ranch house for him somewhere in the San Fernando Valley. I designed two houses on Los Feliz Boulevard, one for a Mr. and Mrs. Deutch and one for Judge Isaac Pacht. I built a home in the Echo Park district for Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Sherman. These were the people who so kindly towed me to El Centro from the middle of the desert between Yuma and El Centro in 1921. In 1926 I built residences for King, Robinson, Hartley, Roberts, Crane, Troyer, Barancik, and the Cohen house on June Street.

VALENTINE: What role did the clients play in the design of these homes?

LEE: The clients played a very important role in the design of a house. My system was to drive the clients around the city and have them point out houses that they liked or disliked. After a few hours, I had a key to what their tastes were, and of course the number of rooms and the way they lived was an important part of deciding what their house was going to be like. I believe that a house should reflect the way people want to live if they are going to be comfortable.





I remember an instance where a client that I had built some commercial buildings for desired to build a house and purchased a lot. Their name was Louis Conrad. Mr. Conrad was very modern in his thinking and wanted something with modern characteristics. His wife had a very elaborate Italian dining-room suite, which furniture she was in love with, and she insisted on having an Italian type of residence, wanted heavy drapes and small windows. Mr. Conrad wanted just the opposite. I sat with them night after night, trying to have them end their arguments with some kind of a compromise. Eventually they both passed away, never having had the house of their dreams.

In 1927 I designed a house for Mr. and Mrs. Joe Aller, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Danziger, and several houses in the Beverly Ridge Estates, which company I was their architectural advisor. The restrictions of Beverly Estates at that time required that all houses have a tile roof. While this was practical from the fire standpoint in the hills, it came about because the banks did refuse to finance any modern houses of a flat-roof type. The bank said that modern architecture would never last, and they did not want to have a mortgage on them.

I designed a couple of houses that were built on Malibu beach, one of which was for the motion picture director Todd Browning, for whom I also designed a house on



Rodeo Drive, approximately the corner of Sunset. At the time he bought the lot, which was about 1927 or '28, he asked me what I thought of the location. My answer was that I thought the location was great for a residence and someday would be one of the best apartment sites that you could imagine. Of course this came about. However, the zoning in Beverly Hills prevents it from being used for an apartment. The lots on the ocean at Malibu beach at that time were renting for fifty dollars a month and were for sale for ten thousand dollars. The fifty dollars a month were figured as returning 6 percent on the sale price. At this time, I built the Sam Silbert house on Highland Avenue and built my own home at Whitworth [Drive] and Hayworth Avenue, which I believe we discussed earlier.

It was about the fall of 1928 when a gentleman came to my office without an appointment and sat down with me at my desk and unfolded a sketch of a large piece of property in Cincinnati. He said his name was [Rudolph] Wurlitzer and he owned an entire block in the major part of town. On this block, he wanted to have an office building, shops, and two theaters, one a motion picture theater and the other a legitimate theater. He had seen some of my work and was interested in making a deal for me to prepare the plans. This conversation was such a shock that I expected a man with a white coat to come in and get him at any



minute. However, he gave me his hotel name and room number and said he would see me later. I immediately went to my bank and had them wire Cincinnati, and the information came back that he really was Mr. Wurlitzer of the music fame and family and the property was indeed his. Of course, at night that was the topic of our conversation, and I prepared the preliminary sketches, had them mounted on cardboard and shipped them to Cincinnati. On the day that I shipped the carton of drawings, when I was home that evening, my wife said to me, "What was the name of your client in Cincinnati?" I told her it was Mr. Wurlitzer. She says, "I wonder if that's the same man that died today." It was. The project was never built, although the estate paid for my drawings.

About the year 1928, I was contacted by a representative of Louis B. Mayer that Will Hays had been selected as what was then called the "czar" of the motion picture industry. Mr. Mayer wanted to build a building on a property that he and Irving Thalberg owned at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Western Avenue, which would become the office for Will Hays and also the office for the Central Casting Bureau, which was then started to list all of the extras in Hollywood [Motion Picture Producers Association Building]. There were no computers at that time, so they had tremendous file rooms with individuals



cataloged, with their pictures, for every type that the motion pictures required. [tape recorder off] We designed a magnificent office for Mr. Hays and his staff, [tape recorder off] and this building became the hub of the large wheel of motion picture production in the Hollywood-Los Angeles area. At the ribbon cutting of the building, Irving Thalberg and his beautiful wife, Norma Shearer, were the celebrities.

On this building I had a lot of fun doing some sculpturing or having sculptors do the work under my direction. One of the ideas I had was to take the lower balcony of the fire escape, cast it in concrete, and with a type of design in the spirit of a Greek bas-relief, I depicted the taking of a motion picture. The scene had actors, directors, cameramen, script girl, and various employees used in making a moving picture. The key to the situation was that, in the Greek style, everyone was nude. This was probably the first porno in Hollywood.









TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

NOVEMBER 20, 1985

LEE: This is the afternoon of November 20, 1985, Maggie [Martha] Valentine interviewing S. Charles Lee. In 1928, the Fox [Film Corporation] West Coast people called me into their office and explained how films were being distributed and a problem they had. The film company designated a first run in each city. This meant that the pictures were bought by the theater and ran as long as required for box-office receipts to be substantial, and then the next run was given a chance at the same picture. This made it essential that they have the proper size theater in the proper locations in order to maximize their return. Their present problem was that first run was in downtown Los Angeles, and the next city of affluence seemed to be Beverly Hills, which had a few small theaters but no flagship. They wanted to acquire a property as close to the borderline of Los Angeles as possible for a first-run theater. The best available site at that time was the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Hamilton Drive, which was just one lot inside of the Beverly Hills city limits. They desired a 2,200-seat theater on this location which would preempt the first runs of the district and draw people probably as far east as Vermont Avenue. East of there would probably gravitate to the downtown area.



We designed this theater [Fox Wilshire Theatre] incorporating what we felt was the new art deco mode, originating a great deal of the art deco feel and ornamentation. We did the side walls of the lobby in a combination of black and silver, which was so striking at the time as to create an audible comment from the spectators. We had a small commercial tower at the corner of the building, about six stories in height, on top of which we mounted a rotating Fox sign that could be seen for miles in all directions. The two top floors of this building we designed as a suite for one of the vice-presidents of the Fox company [Howard Sheehan]. Because the area was small, we had the living room, dining room, and kitchen on the top floor, where the maximum view was, and you stepped down a stairway to the bedrooms on the floor below. The apartment was distinctly modern and art deco and very striking at the time. The Fox Wilshire was built with a full stage, greenroom in the basement and dressing rooms, and a very large proscenium. When the ultra wide films came into play with a few films, the Fox Wilshire proscenium was big enough to handle anything. One of the things we did in the Fox Wilshire was put the loge seats, which sold for a higher admission price, in the first rows of the balcony--they were by far the best seats for all kinds of entertainment--and we designed our



stairways with comfortable intervening ramps so that the climb was not too much of a burden. We designed a very modern art deco side panel and ceiling tying in the proscenium to the general atmosphere. During one of the years of alteration of the theater, these panels were plastered over. When the theater changed hands again, [tape recorder turned off] they discovered these panels and reactivated them.

Due to the latest method of film distribution, it is more practical for the exhibitor to have five or six or eight small auditoriums and move his film from one auditorium to the other than it is to operate a large theater. Therefore, the Fox Wilshire was turned into the Wilshire Theatre and now has only live entertainment.

The Fox company was quite pleased with the services surrounding the building of the Fox Wilshire and decided to have me represent them as their architect on most of their future programs. However, before discussing this, I'll drop back to some of the hard times that were on the horizon.

Because of my experience with building and selling duplex buildings--and when money was scarce there was nothing but exchanges--I decided to try and lay the groundwork for quickly appraising the values of vacant property which might be offered in exchange, because





practically all of the real estate deals during that time were made by exchanging cats for dogs. I therefore entered into a deal with a gentleman named Leonard Hammel, who had formerly been with the Union Bank in their real estate department and came into my office to assist as a businessman. We decided to publish the **Los Angeles Blue Book of Land Values** and set about this task by driving through all of the streets of Los Angeles and putting a dollar figure per front foot on various neighborhoods, which did not necessarily represent the actual value but did represent the relative value of one residential area to another or one commercial street to another. We were relatively successful with publishing the book and did republish later years. However, when the architectural business picked up, we abandoned the book project.

Another idea I tried to develop during these years consisted of the thought that, "Why couldn't we build houses mass production such as we do automobiles?" And I sat down and designed a half a dozen houses using the principle of sheet-metal stamping. I would have typical-size walls for living rooms, bedrooms, and other parts of the house, and the design was such that they could stamp out a quantity of walls and then decorate them the same as automobiles with possibly a photographic process of woods or colors or any decorative feature. The side walls of the



bathrooms were designed and items such as medicine cases were pressed into place. All holes for plumbing and electric wiring were, of course, punched at the same time. I had the trim on the outside of the building with various choices that an owner could have from a catalog and everything clamped together on the same principle that an automobile was constructed. I took the matter up with the U.S. Steel company [United States Steel Corporation] who told me that it would cost fifty million dollars to make the dies for such a project and if I would furnish the dies they would be interested. I told them that if I had the fifty million dollars I wouldn't be interested in the houses.

A couple of other ideas came to mind in between jobs that I made some attempts to develop. One time I had the idea of making movable neon letters that could be clamped on to a marquee or used in a store in their department advertising. I had the letters blown by a glassblower who understood neon tubing and made a portable energy generator that could be coupled with the letters. The letters could be moved in any combination and when hung on the rods that I provided, would be illuminated. This seemed to be a good idea to a lot of people, but the cost was excessive for the results, so I abandoned this.



Then during World War II, I developed a remote-control bomb using some of the electronic theories that I had for my neon signs. I developed a bomb that could be placed wherever the commander wanted it, particularly when he was leaving an area, and then the bomb could be detonated at a later date either by approaching by airplane or remote control from whatever area he was occupying. I demonstrated this bomb by planting flashbulbs throughout the hills, and I applied to the commander of the Los Angeles district [tape recorder off] to drive in my car with me and I would give him a demonstration, which I did. He was very much impressed and said he was going to forward it to the proper authorities. This was the last I heard from anyone regarding the matter until, after the war, I read one publication that described the item as being used as one of the secret weapons. Of course the system today is very easy with our new knowledge of electronics, and better versions have been developed.

I was commissioned to design a restaurant for a gentleman named Marchetti, who was an Italian who had immigrated to the United States and was a very successful restaurateur. Part of his requirements were that the restaurant reflect Italian influence, and I had a tile roof on a one-story building. When I applied to the city of Los Angeles for a permit, they advised me that this building,



being in the number one fire zone, would have to have a parapet wall around the building at the roof line. Of course, this would nullify the tile roof. In order to get around this, I developed a deep gutter just inside the parapet wall and had tile on the parapet wall that would tie in with the sight line with the balance of the roof. However, I explained to the city that, while this was legal, I thought it was bad from an earthquake standpoint because the sun in the morning came from the east and in the afternoon from the west, which twisted these walls in a minor way and eventually weakened them. They refused the arguments; however, fifty years later, they made everyone take off the parapet walls.

During the early days of my practice, I joined the American Institute of Architects and remember at one of the meetings, shortly after A. C. Martin [Albert Carey Martin, Sr.] was given the commission to build the city hall, there was a knock-down-drag-out argument between Mr. Martin and some other contenders for the commission. I felt that the institute at that time was not representing the best interests of the city and the profession. Subsequently, I resigned and in later years I joined the Society of American Registered Architects and was eventually made a fellow of that institution and awarded their Synergy Award. I found them to be a much more practical and





tractable organization. I served the county on two different commissions, at one time on County Road facilities and at another time at the County Building and Safety Division. It was our duty to check all plans for county-financed structures.

Recalling some of my early experiences and endeavors, in the early thirties I found myself rapidly running out of funds. Buildings were almost impossible to finance and architectural commissions were few and far between. As an example, a client of mine had a lot on which the city of Los Angeles' bureau of power and light [Water and Power Department] agreed to rent a building if you would build same. At that time the building was estimated to cost under two dollars a square foot, and even with the city of Los Angeles as signator[y] on the lease, it was impossible to get financing.

However, I was able to collect a long overdue bill and told my wife it was time for me to complete my education by going to Europe. So we packed our relative suitcases and went second class by ship and visited England, France, Germany, and Italy. At that time when we were in Italy, Mussolini put everyone to work building new streets and digging up old areas, some of which had irreplaceable artifacts. By giving a worker ten or twenty-five cents, I was able to have him dig up several pieces which the



government consented to my removing from Italy. They still make a most impressive addition to my living room.

While in Germany, I noticed that they were flying airplanes from one city to another that were not carrying passengers. Digging into the matter, I discovered that they were training pilots contrary to the Versailles Treaty. This bothered me and a few years later I founded what I called the Falcon Air Corps. The object of the air corps that I had was to take young potential aviators and give them the necessary instruction of all groundwork for flying, such as navigation, meteorology, and some mechanics. The cost of renting an airplane to fly at that time was about five dollars an hour, including gasoline. I could afford to pay the instructors but not for the rental of the airplanes, and most of my students could not either. Therefore, I took the matter up with the United States government and asked their help in the program by providing us with airplanes and I would get public-spirited citizens to assist in paying the instructors for ground instruction. Their reply to this request was that it was too militaristic for the United States to become involved. This was apparently the influence of [Charles] Lindbergh on the air force at that time, as he had declared the Germans invincible. It so happens that when we did enter the Second World War against Germany that the air



force adopted my plan almost in total. They trained their pilots the same way and had the same results that I would have given them except they were many years late. Due to the fact that I was instructing in navigation and my pupils asked so many questions about flying, I found it necessary for myself to become a pilot, which I did with pilot number 35180 in 1935.

Going back to the design of theaters, during my serving the Fox company, several presidents took office, one of which was a gentleman named Harold Franklin, a very astute showman. However, most of the control of the Fox company was centered in New York and not on the West Coast, and orders came to remove Franklin as the president. It was a very sudden move and shocked the theater industry. Shortly thereafter, I got a call from Mr. Franklin that he had joined forces with Howard Hughes and he wanted to build a chain of theaters of a special type. After considerable consultation, we designed what we called the "automatic theater." The first one was called the Studio [Theatre, Los Angeles] and was on Hollywood Boulevard. The idea was to save as much labor as possible. There was a cashier who took your money but did not issue any tickets; by electronic devices when you approached the entrance door they opened for you; automatic candy machines, cigarette machines were in the lobby. There were no ushers, but



there was, of course, a projectionist. The theater was operated by two people.

As usual in Hollywood during those days, the wisecrackers always had a cliché when something new happened. In this case the saying was that "Franklin had the ideas and Hughes had the money, but the company would end up where Hughes would have the education and Franklin would have the money." This company was eventually abandoned and Harold Franklin went to Mexico, where he was a very successful promoter, and I did work for him there.

Along about this period, I was commissioned to design a desert club in La Quinta, California, which is a suburb of Palm Springs, so to speak. It consisted of a small clubhouse, a large swimming pool, and many small bungalows. The object of the club was to have members buy houses from the builders and have the use of the clubhouse and the swimming pool. In later years, they called me back to build a larger building with dining rooms and bar, kitchens, and other facilities.

During that time, I was flying my own airplane, and I had scraped off a top of one of the sand dunes and had my own airport for quite a few years. I remember joining a club called the Aviation Country Club. On weekends we used to fly to a specific place and all meet with our airplanes and our guests, usually have a barbecued lunch, and then go home. So at this particular day or weekend, I invited the





entire club to La Quinta. While in the La Quinta area, it was impossible to receive radio signals, due to the fact that we were surrounded by mountains. Consequently, this was on December 7, 1941, and no one had received any information about Pearl Harbor. Flying on the way home, I called my base, which was then called the Grand Central Airport [Grand Central Air Terminal] in Glendale, and told them I was on my way, and they told me the airport was closed. I consequently talked to the tower and said I would go to Santa Monica [Clover Field Municipal Airport]. They said Santa Monica was closed. After checking for all the airports, I said, "What's the matter?" They said, "Well, all the airports in this area are closed." I told them that I had two hours of fuel and I was coming in whether or not, which I did, and when my plane landed two mechanics rushed onto the field and took the propeller off my airplane.

This airplane was called a Monocoupe, which I used in the Civil Air Patrol, and during the war was the commander of an air base used by the Civil Air Patrol. In later years, I had a Beach Craft which I used in the performance of my duties as an architect, having at one time fifteen theaters in construction in different cities in California and would fly a route while supervising the construction.

It was in 1929 when the owner of a property in Eden Hot Springs commissioned me to develop the area into a



resort. We built a hotel and bungalows and all the appurtenances to a hot springs hotel. I've lost track of what became of the operation.

## SECOND PART

DECEMBER 18, 1985

LEE: This is December 18, 1985, Maggie Valentine interviewing S. Charles Lee in Beverly Hills, California. The time was the early thirties and the Fox West Coast company was apparently so satisfied with my services that they began naming me in all their leases, whereby a building was to be built I was to be retained as the architect. One of the early results of this was the Fox Phoenix [Theatre; Phoenix, Arizona], at which time I was heavily experimenting in art deco and I believe this was reflected in most all of the interiors.

It was in this same period that the widening of Highland Avenue was coming about, and I was retained by quite a number of property owners to remodel their properties, as Highland Avenue had quite a few feet taken off of the buildings on both sides of the street. In one case, the owner had an apartment house at the corner of Highland Avenue and Camrose Avenue, and the widening of the street apparently would destroy the building. I negotiated to buy the building, which I did. Then, while studying the



possibility of moving the building to another lot, the idea struck me as follows: The building ordinance specified a rear yard of 10 percent of the depth of the lot and a side yard of four feet. I figured that if I moved the building to within four feet of the then rear yard and left five feet of the then side yard and called the front of the building to be on Camrose Avenue, even though it would be entered from the Highland side, the building would be legal. I proceeded to do this, and a building inspector came on the property and declared the project illegal. However, by appearing before the board of building and safety [Building and Safety Commission] with excerpts from the ordinance and the proper plans showing the new location of the building, it was ruled that the building was legal as I had moved it, and the alteration to the building was minor. I eventually sold the property for a handsome profit.

This experience reminds me of the time in Beverly Hills when one of the major ladies' ready-to-wear companies was building on Wilshire Boulevard. They bought an apartment house in back of the property which was to be destroyed for additional parking. It was a two-story apartment house, quite valuable, which I purchased for a very small sum, I believe around eight thousand dollars. I also purchased a lot on the same street about a block



away. I then cut the apartment house in three pieces. I took the rear one third and moved it onto part of the parking lot, then down the street and set it on new foundations at the rear of the new lot. I did the same with the central portion next and the front portion, last and when it was put together I had a beautiful apartment house which I sold for a considerable profit.

Along this same vein, when the earthquake hit Huntington Park, I saw a two-story building that the first floor had collapsed and the building had a condemned sign on it by the building department. I purchased the lot from the distraught owner for a very small amount and removed, with the debris on the lot, all of the external walls. The second-floor interior and the roof was intact, and the second-floor itself was intact, which I had jacked up. By pouring new exterior walls, I was able to reconstruct a very good two-story building, which I made into a medical complex and sold at a handsome profit.

My point of view of the architect's mission: Unless he is devoting his talents to noncommercial buildings such as schools, churches, government edifices, that he is called upon to design buildings for their commercial ability to return a profit to the owners. Therefore, I believed his training must be one-third design, one-third construction, and one-third business.





I began getting numerous calls from San Francisco from theater owners and decided to open an office there, which I did and built many theaters in Northern California, among which was Merced, San Mateo, and other small towns. I sent to manage this office the young man who had started with me as an office boy in 1922.

In 1933 we designed the Fox Florence Theatre [Los Angeles] where I again emphasized the automobile necessity and arranged the entrance in such a way that the automobile would drive in through the theater courtyard to the parking lot. At the request of the Fox company, this theater was designed in a Spanish motif. This building, by the way, was one of the few buildings in the area to withstand the earthquake with very minor damage. In fact, the damage was so slight that several insurance companies sent their engineers and adjusters to consult with me.

During the period of the widening of Highland Avenue, Mr. Max Factor called me up and asked me to come and visit him regarding their buildings on Highland Avenue. These buildings consisted of a warehouse and a garage. He wanted a showroom, manufacturing facilities, and a laboratory for testing of materials. Due to the widening, we had to cut off the front ten feet of both buildings. They also owned the corner lot adjoining the garage building, and I designed two types of building for him, one, the art deco,



which he eventually decided to accept, and the other was a Streamline Moderne at least twenty years ahead of its time. At that time, the Max Factor Company were doing the makeup for all of the important motion picture personalities, and this was attended to by Max Factor himself. Later on, they gave the distribution of Max Factor products to a distribution company, keeping Hollywood for Mr. Factor's personal domain. We eventually built the talcum powder plant behind the Highland Avenue structures. The distribution company later retained me to do several of their buildings outside of the United States.

One day, an exhibitor came to see me about building a theater that was to be used partially as a city hall in a small town way up in the mountains, Quincy. We designed the theater in wood because that was the material they had available. There's more to this story than building this theater, because the Fox company wanted a theater in Lakewood during the war years when building materials were restricted for any amusement purposes. There was nothing to prevent you from moving a building at that time, and I negotiated with the exhibitor for whom I had built the theater in Quincy to buy it from him and move it to Lakewood. They took the building apart, marking all parts of it like a child's block set, and used it as the base for starting the Lakewood Theatre. Before we were through



modifications, it was a modern theater built with modern materials. That's how the permit was issued.

One day a delegation from Mexico came to the Fox company to discuss a possible joint venture between the Fox company and a Mexican group. The Mexican group was to build the theaters and the Fox company was to participate in the operation. While this group was still in the office of the president, they sent for me and introduced me to the Mexican principals with the statement that if Fox was to operate the theaters, I was to design them. I opened offices in Mexico, and the system there at that time was that the architect not only designed the buildings but constructed them from the foundation up. I subsequently built nine theaters and a moving-picture studio.

I had several interesting experiences during this construction period. One of the first theaters I built had a tower, and as the water system in Mexico at that time was a very low pressure, it was necessary to have a tank to store the water to maintain a pressure on the system. Therefore, I had a tank built in the upper part of the tower with pumps that would fill the tank at off-peak hours. The theater was about to open and we ran the water into the tank, which promptly leaked into the building. My client, the owner, was furious, because I had brought my own superintendent from the United States. He said, "I



went to great expense to have all of you experts, and here this tank is leaking!" I called in the plumber that had been working on this part of the job. After I had inspected the tank connections I spoke to him and I said the collars connecting the pipes to the tank had not been tightened, to which he said, "I know that." I then asked him why he had not tightened the flanges and the collars, and he told me that his boss had not instructed him to do so!

Another experience: I designed a very beautiful theater in the middle of a large plot of ground. As usual, I had the aisles empty out into exits which were directly opening to the large plot of ground, and when I submitted the plans to the building department, they turned them down because their ordinance was written at the time that they built the national theater [Palacio de Bellas Artes], which was patterned after the Paris Opera House. The way this plan was designed was that the auditorium was in the center with a large corridor surrounding the auditorium. The aisles and exits entered into this corridor, which eventually led to the street, and the building department wanted me to have this corridor surrounding my auditorium. These spaces we usually cluttered up with cleaning material, selling of candy, fruits [inaudible] and at the end were toilet rooms.





I insisted on wanting to know why they would require this corridor and was referred to the chief of the building department, who decided to interview me after two weeks of insistent demands for an appointment. He said the answer to my question of why they wanted the corridors was very simple. Let us assume there's a fire in the auditorium. In my plan, the people would run directly to the outside and catch pneumonia; in their plan they would cool off on their way to the outside! [laughs] In order to offset this complex arrangement, I was able to get the minister of health to issue an edict to the building department stating that my plan would not cause more deaths than theirs, and eventually they asked me to rewrite their ordinance.

On another theater building, as part of the decorative scheme, I was using some carved celotex.



TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

DECEMBER 18, 1985

LEE: They did not have this material in stock in Mexico City, so they had to send elsewhere for the material. We were nearing the completion date for the theater, in which films had been booked, and I was anxious to get the material on the job. On a Monday morning I came on the job and asked the superintendent, "Tony, did the material come today?" He said, "No, señor." I was on the job on Tuesday. I said, "Tony, did the material come today?" He said, "No, señor" Wednesday I was busy. I came on the job Thursday morning and I said, "Tony, did the material come today?" He said, "No, señor." As I was about to leave the premises, I got an idea. I went back to the superintendent and I said, "Tony, did the material come yesterday?" He said, "Si, señor."

One of the theaters we designed there was rather important. It had a large capacity and huge spans. One day I was on the job with the owner and he said, "What is all of this reinforcing steel about on these columns?" I said, "This is part of our earthquake resistance design." He said, "That's too much for here. Leave out every other rod." And I said, "Okay, leave my name off the plans from here on out."



On another theater we designed, which was probably the most important theater on the Paseo de Reforma, had an auditorium and an office building in conjunction. As the subsoil in Mexico City is mostly mud, we designed piles for the buildings. When we were awarding contracts, the owner insisted on having piles only under the auditorium and not under the office building. I knew that the office building would settle at a different rate than the auditorium, so where the buildings had a joint use, I designed a metal plate on a hinge that would take up the difference. When I went back to review these buildings some years later, the office building was four to five inches lower than when I had built it, but the metal plates had overcome the technical problems.

Construction problems in those days in Mexico were quite difficult. At one time, I was excavating a large piece of ground and paying the trucks by the load of material that they were taking out through the exit gate. I was standing by the checker at the exit gate for some time and seemed to recognize a certain truck. This truck and probably many others would come out through the gate, go around the block, go back into the premises and come out again, charging for another load. This and other problems with the police and the building inspectors made life very interesting.



In 1941, we designed and were building the Tower Bowl in San Diego. This had a steel tower in which revolving bowling balls of huge size made up the sign, and while the steel had been ordered and, in fact, was on the way to San Diego, when orders came from the government that no steel could be used in nonessential buildings. After a great deal of effort and wire-pulling, we were given permission to use this much steel and no more, which, of course, was all we needed anyhow.

The Tower Bowl was one of the largest in the United States at that time, having thirty-two alleys. It was built on two pieces of land, one on Broadway that went the fifty-foot entrance to the rear, where the alleys were built. In this fifty-foot entranceway, we built one of the longest bars in San Diego, which was right in the traffic lane that the sailors used coming from the ships. Needless to say, it was one of the most successful bars in town. The bowling alleys were also successful, although in later years it was difficult to get bowling pins, which were made of maple which due to war conditions was difficult to obtain.





SECOND PART

JANUARY 20, 1986

VALENTINE: The automobile always played an important part in your architecture, beginning with the Fox Florence drive-in marquee. I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit.

LEE: I began recognizing the importance of automobiles to our buildings starting at the time we finished the Los Angeles Theatre. In 1931 I began analyzing parking for the Los Angeles Theatre and came up with the idea of building a parking garage underneath Pershing Square. I developed preliminary plans for this and published it in the **Los Angeles Times** and even had a luncheon for the major property owners in downtown Los Angeles, whereby I submitted the idea to them and also to the Downtown Businessmen's Association, and it was enthusiastically received by all of them. The political complications were tremendous at that time, and I was not able to cope with them. In the 1950s there appeared in the paper an announcement that the garage was going to be built under Pershing Square. I quickly got in touch with the Downtown Businessmen's Association, sending them copies of our correspondence and told them that I expected to be the architect. Their reply was that that was last generation and they did not know that I existed. It was subsequently



built practically in accordance with my plans, with the major exception that I had an outlet extending to Wilshire Boulevard, which would have improved the traffic pattern tremendously over the one that they actually built. The other feature that I had was an underground passage connecting to the major stores and other outlets on Broadway. This also would have removed the surface traffic. Had they gone ahead with my original plans, according to the estimates of cost at that time, parking would be five cents an hour and would have paid for the garage in ten years.

The next project where I recognized the importance of the garage was in the Fox Florence Theatre, designed in 1931, whereby I had the automobiles drive in and have access to the box office, allowing the passengers to depart from the cars in a beautiful patio. The driver would then take the car to the parking lot. This was a successful solution.

I then made preliminary designs for a major theater at Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue at the southwest corner. At that time, this was one of the major traffic arteries from the standpoint of traffic count, and I designed the theater in such a way that it had a parking garage and a box-office arrangement that combined the parking with the entrance to the theater. This project was never built.



We then built the Arden Theatre in Lynwood, whereby we designed the box office and marquee marking the entrance to the parking lot, which made a successful parking arrangement.

Following this, the drive-in theater became more and more important and solved, to a great extent, the problem of automobile traffic combined with the theater exhibition. Incidentally to this, the snack bar became the major income source, exceeding the profitability of the venture more than the exhibition of the pictures. It also became a source of secondary income in many communities by using the facility for swap meets during the day on Saturdays and Sundays.

VALENTINE: In the late 1930s you did a lot of neighborhood theaters, small houses in which you developed what I like to call the "Lee signature," the seduction of a customer through use of light and pattern and neon. Can you talk about that?

LEE: During this period, the exhibitors began making money, due to the fact that it was the major entertainment for the lowest price, and many exhibitors wanted to upgrade their theaters. In my view, the importance at that time was to capture the advertising value of the automobile traffic passing the theater, and I began to mark the theater with a more or less amusement type of architecture,



whereby I developed the theory that the show started on the sidewalk. For those who passed by the theater on foot, I actually did change the sidewalk and made it architecturally pleasing and different from the sidewalk that they had been walking on, so that their attention would be focused on the entrance to the theater. This pleased almost all of the exhibitors and almost became a signature.

I next became intrigued with the idea of streamlining some of the architecture. This was accentuated by the architectural use of glass blocks and aluminum extrusions. One of the early and outstanding examples of my point of view at that time was the Academy Theatre [Inglewood, California], a streamlined box office and entrance and the signature tower--which I designed as a traveling lighting effect--terminating with a ball accentuated by neon at the top of the tower that announced the theater miles away. This theater, incidentally, was the first attempt I made to use black light and fluorescent paint. I also devised a method of dimming neon so that it could be used in the coves of the auditorium as part of the lighting effect. We designed the carpets and had them woven in fluorescent material, so that when you entered the auditorium when it was dark, the carpets led you down the aisle without interfering with the audience's view of the picture, a successful, though costly, installation.





One of the major annoyances in the standard motion picture theater was the fact that while the picture was on the screen and new audiences were coming into the auditorium, there would be a flash of light when the doors were open from the lobby to the aisle. To overcome this, I designed what I called a "light trap." This was where I had the doors open perpendicular to the screen instead of parallel. Therefore, when the doors were open, there was no flash of light across the screen. This was quite successful, although it narrowed down after the demand for additional merchandise space became a necessity in the main lobby. Eventually, we had to design the entrances around the merchandising, as this source of income was of great importance to the exhibitor.

In this regard, I designed the first candy counter, which was a portable unit that could be folded up at night and had an air-conditioning self-contained unit so that it could be kept at a constant temperature, as chocolates change colors according to the temperature. This was so successful that it gradually made it necessary to have major candy counters, which when first introduced had popcorn-making machines. The sale of popcorn became so profitable that eventually popcorn factories took the place of individual popping machines, and it was one of the most profitable items that the exhibitor sold.



VALENTINE: The Bruin Theatre [Los Angeles] and the Grand Lake Theatre in Oakland both have huge facades, huge marquees that are really constant the entire facade of the building. How did you develop that?

LEE: This again was the recognition of the advertising value of automobiles passing the theater during the day. I believe the Bruin is an outstanding example of this, being at the intersection of several streets. It proved to be much more important advertising the picture than the newspapers. We designed several theaters whereby we had corner exposure using this theory. The Grand Lake in Oakland was another example.

VALENTINE: You've received many honors from foreign countries, haven't you?

LEE: Yes, I did. In about 1934, the Royal Institute of British Architects decided to make a permanent exhibit of some of our works. They used drawings and photographs for a complete permanent exhibit in London, which unfortunately was completely destroyed in the blitz.

There was another item that, while not connected directly with our architectural work, nevertheless was important. It came about as follows: During the 1940s I set up a fund with the University of Southern California to grant prizes to the outstanding architectural student graduate. Among other prizes, was the offer that I made



that any winner could have a job in my office if he so desired. In about 1945 the prize was won by a Panamanian student, and he elected to work in the office. After many years in the office, during which time we had a branch office in Mexico, we made our own architectural dictionary in Spanish and introduced the metric system for our foreign plans. Eventually, I sent the Panamanian to Mexico to manage that office, and he eventually went back to Panama to practice there.

Some years later, I had activities in Panama, among which I built a building in the industrial zone and had some commercial activities. Many of my activities were recognized by the government as being constructive for the republic of Panama, and the president of Panama nominated me to be a caballero in the Order of Vasco Nuñez Balboa, which is the highest medal which can be presented to a non-Panamanian. This medal was awarded to me while I was in Beverly Hills, and they sent an ambassador to present me with the medal in the presence of a television audience. The ambassador that was sent for this mission was none other than the Panamanian student who had won the USC prize. We are, incidentally, good friends, visiting each other annually for a period of over forty years.

VALENTINE: Your clients included a lot of Hollywood directors and producers. I wonder if you could talk about that, what it was like to work with them.



LEE: One of the important pluses of having offices in Los Angeles was the fact that the motion picture business induced people to think in new terms, as differentiating from those who ordered buildings designed in the East. If we had new ideas, they were usually readily acceptable by the motion picture colony. Some of these important names will be easily recognized for many years, as they are synonymous with the motion picture industry. The Motion Picture Producers [Association] Building at Hollywood [Boulevard] and Western [Avenue] we designed for Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg, at that time two of the most important executives in Hollywood. I was the personal architect for Cecil B. De Mille, designing some commercial buildings for him. We designed the offices for Charlie [Charles] Skouras, who was president of Fox West Coast; the homes for Todd Browning and Irving Cummings, who were the top directors of their time; and the theater on the lot for Walt Disney.

When Mr. Disney called me in, he explained that he wanted something advanced in sound and projection, and when I brought preliminary plans to him for review, his desk was so cluttered that he asked me to put the plans on the floor, whereby he and I on our hands and knees reviewed the plans. At that time, I anticipated, probably, stereo-type sound, whereby new effects could be made to go with his





cartoons. This was indeed the forerunner of what was to come twenty years later.

I also designed a house for a gag writer named [Al] Boasberg. Everything had to be different and imaginative. To start with, he wanted to be sure that his in-laws would not be house guests so insisted on one bedroom, with no provision for additions. The guest lavatory was designed as the interior of an old outhouse, pine walls and a tin washbowl and tin pitcher fastened to the walls, where the water would run from the pitcher into the bowl and very large wheels to operate the water valves. One was labeled "Hot" and the other was labeled "Not." He then had venetian blinds made for the window on which he inscribed, "Mr. Lee ruined my lot." On the front lawn was sunk into the ground a rowboat, which was then filled with dirt and used as a flower garden. I did not mention that the venetian blind was made of yardsticks. The guest lavatory was actually built as a three-holer. The center one was built over a standard water closet; the other two had framed pictures, one of his father-in-law and one of his mother-in-law.

When FHA [Federal Housing Administration] was first proposed, I felt there might be a good opportunity for architects. The first thing that I did was make up a series of ten or fifteen designs, floor plans and



elevations for houses fitting within the FHA parameters, then published these as part of a dummy book, which I quickly presented to the Bank of America, hoping to have their sponsorship and launch a program. The attitude of the officers of the bank at that time was that they did not want to encourage the government to go into any financing and would have nothing to do with the program when it started. As it turned out, had I pursued the idea further, it would have been a great success. However, I was so discouraged at the time, I abandoned further thought in this direction, although I eventually built more than 25,000 units under FHA.

One of the most successful of these ventures was the community of Holly Park, which is in the city of Gardena. This project had 7,500 houses under one program. In Holly Park, the two major parallel streets were Western Avenue and Crenshaw Boulevard, which we designated as industrial and built large numbers of industrial plants on both streets.



TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 30, 1986

LEE: This is Thursday, January 30, 1986, Maggie [Martha] Valentine interviewing architect S. Charles Lee at his office in Beverly Hills.

VALENTINE: Last time we were talking about the theaters in the 1930s. The Tumbleweed Theatre out in Five Points--what later became El Monte--was done in 1939, and that's one of the most interesting theaters.

LEE: This was really an interesting theater built for a very interesting client. He was a very young man with limited capital. The location he had for this theater was really out in the sticks; there were no buildings near it and it was not in any special residential neighborhood. However, he needed the theater for film-buying purposes more than anything else and told me he would accept a barn, as long as it had a projection room. I thought this was a good idea, so I designed the whole project as a barn and its farmyard. I used open-beam ceilings, and for the exterior tower, we built a wooden structure and a simulated windmill. There was a small pond in the front yard with ducks, geese, and barnyard objects. The entire theater, including the neon, cost \$35,000, a new low in cost and architecture. It was a success from the beginning.



In about this period of time, I was building a considerable number of apartments, and on numerous occasions, I had to build over an area that had an easement for subway purposes. This easement ran from downtown Los Angeles throughout the city and was granted for the purpose of building a subway. In order for us to build on the lot, it was necessary for us to dig deep caissons on either side of the easement and bridge same to hold the buildings. I believe that the easement ran for twenty years. At the end of that twenty years, if the subway had not been built--which of course it was not--the easement was quitclaimed back to the landowners. At the present time--this is now 1986--there is talk again of building a subway. Of course the easements have disappeared and new routes have to be designed. The shortsightedness of the city in not providing the funds when the original easement was granted will cost the taxpayer heavily.

While I'm discussing miscellaneous items, I recall an experience in 1924 when an ad appeared in the newspaper from an architect in Chicago [John Morell] wanting a representative on the West Coast. I contacted them and their position was that they were specialists in the meat-packing industry and had a commission to build a packing plant for specialized items in Los Angeles. They retained me as their local representative and sent me the





preliminary schemes, which I interpreted into plans and specifications according to local customs, took bids, and supervised the building. This helped materially in bailing out my financial position.

About 1934, I had a few interesting projects, one of which was building the radio studios for KHJ. Radio was coming in very strong at that time. I also built the Vogue Theatre in Hollywood, which was owned by one of the former vice-presidents of Fox West Coast. I also rebuilt a Fifty-ninth Street school that had been damaged by the earthquake, and it was necessary to reinforce and rebuild the entire building. In this period of time, we rebuilt the Fox Long Beach Theatre, the [Long Beach] Packard showroom, a jewelry store in Long Beach, California. The automobile showroom was for the Packard automobile--once the best and then faded out. We also built the Hotel del Tahquitz in Palm Springs and two theaters in Compton. The Alameda Theatre in Alameda, California; the Merced Theatre in Merced; a medical building and a clinic office building in Santa Monica. In 1936 we built the Hermosa Theatre [Hermosa Beach, California], Stockton Theatre [Stockton, California], Senator Theatre in Oakland, the Grand Lake Theatre in Oakland, and the West Coast Boulevard Theatre [Los Angeles]. The Anaheim Theatre in Anaheim, the El Capitan Theatre in San Francisco, remodeled the Saint Francis Theatre in San Francisco, and the West Coast



Vermont Theatre [Los Angeles]. Among our miscellaneous designs was the Bobby Franks Mausoleum in Chicago. I was approached by the family from Chicago to design same, which was probably the first art deco mausoleum built in the cemetery.

I was once approached by a man to visit him in Whittier to see a lot on which he contemplated building a house. He and his wife were living in a garage which he had built on the site, which was about two acres. Both he and his wife were dressed in blue jeans and had apparently been working on a vegetable garden. They described a very large house that they wanted to build, which would have cost a lot of money. I did not know who they were, but I did get the name of their son and an automobile place at which he was working. So I contacted their son to see if they could afford such a house. The son informed me that payment for the home would be no problem: they could build whatever they wanted. It turned out that he had been a gardener and bought a very cheap parcel of land for a couple of hundred dollars on a hillside. This property turned out to be on Signal Hill. He could afford it, but still lived like a gardener.

The Redwood Theatre Corporation had me build a theater for them in Redwood City and in Woodland, California; and the Blumenfeld [Theatres] circuit had me design two theaters for them in the San Francisco area; Janss



Investment Company, builders of Westwood, had me design the Bruin Theatre to be operated by Fox West Coast; and the Fox West Coast had me design another theater in South Gate.

I was then called to Reno, Nevada, by a gambling syndicate to design a gaming room. They told me they were buying a certain building, which I looked at with them, and this building was to be remodeled. They then asked me to accompany them to the escrow office where they were closing on the building. One of the parties produced a package wrapped in newspaper, and when it was opened, it contained some \$600,000 in cash, which he put into escrow. I knew they could afford the remodeling.

The Stevens Shops of New York decided to move to the West Coast, and I designed about five of their locations. Almost simultaneously, we built the Fox Theatre and the Ritz Theatre, both in Inglewood, and later we built the Academy Theatre, also in Inglewood. It was about 1941 when Charles Skouras, president of [Fox] West Coast, asked me to go to New York to build a theater for his brother George Skouras. We prepared the drawings, and then I went to New York and made a deal with Thomas Lamb to take charge of the New York end. We became fast friends and made an association which we called S. Charles Lee and Thomas Lamb. We built George Skouras's theater in Forest Hills. It was called the Mayfair Theatre. Thomas Lamb had great



talent, and the theater probably reflected a combination of points of view of both of us.

## SECOND PART

FEBRUARY 28, 1986

LEE: [referring back to end of previous session] He died shortly thereafter.

This is Friday February 28, 1986, Maggie Valentine interviewing S. Charles Lee at his office in Beverly Hills. I'm recalling an experience that happened out of our San Francisco office. We had built a theater and were opening same in the Christmas holiday season. The building was completed and painted, with the exception of the soffit of the marquee and the entrance to the theater. The plasterers went on strike. The owner was in a rage: How was he going to open the theater with no soffit to the marquee and the entrance? So I went out and bought huge quantities of a lightweight canvas. I had this stretched across the areas that were unplastered and then brought in large quantities of holly, pine boughs, and various Christmas symbols. Had them all fastened to the canvas. When people walked in, they were very happy, the owner was happy, and no one noticed the difference.

During the war years, the government acquired one of the large beach clubs at the ocean and Pico Street





[Boulevard] and used it for a recreation building for returning soldiers. They made a mess of the building, and at the end of hostilities, I bought the building from the government and remodeled it into what was then called the Santa Monica Ambassador Hotel. I operated the hotel for a couple of years and learned the hotel business the hard way. From a financial standpoint, everything was wrong and particularly the location, from a weather standpoint. I made a concentrated effort to build up a bar business by making an outstanding cocktail lounge arrangement and had the best entertainment available. However, when the weather was right, during the day, there would be plenty of people at the beach. But as soon as the sun went down and it began to cool off, the bar became practically empty. I even[tually sold] the hotel to the Kaiser Hospital, who converted the building to the Cabot Kaiser Hospital, and after several years, the building was vacated and torn down.

The Ambassador Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard at one time was owned by the mortgage company that had foreclosed on same. Eventually, the court offered the hotel for sale. I took in a partner who was in the real estate business and put in a bid to the court for the hotel. If I remember right, it was something like seven million dollars, and I was awarded the hotel. Not having the seven million



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dollars to complete the purchase, my partner contacted several hotel operators. One, the Schine Hotels, sent a representative to the coast and agreed with my partner to put up the money for the purchase and give us a 25 percent interest for our position. My partner, who was an excellent real estate negotiator, but a very poor keeper of records, made a verbal deal with Schine's representative that they never kept.

About this same period, I bought from the Times Mirror company the Florentine Gardens on Hollywood Boulevard. I had about four partners in this venture, and at one time, we hired Sophie Tucker as our leading attraction and paid her the highest salary she had ever received up to that time, which, if I remember right, was seventy-five hundred dollars a week. We ran the place for a couple of years, then leased it, and the lessee defaulted. We took the building back, and I remember one of my partners in the project decided he wanted to run the operation, and I made a lease with him in which he had to pay me the rent daily. We eventually sold the property to-- I think it was to the unions.

While casting around for an economical way to build auditoriums, I investigated the building of Quonset-hut type of construction, which figured much more economical than standard procedures. One group that I designed for a



prominent entrepreneur in Mexico were put up in small towns, where they would use a television set and make what they called a cantina or bar with the television as the entertainment. Because in those days, the workers in the small towns were usually peons that worked the farms and could never buy a television set. So this was a form of theater for the whole area.

I built several theaters in the United States using the Quonset hut. Most of them have been torn down by this time. One of the theaters of this type I designed for a Mr. Burton Jones. Our association came about like this: I believe the draft age for the war was forty-five years, and Mr. Jones was drafted one day before his forty-fifth birthday. He wrote to me from overseas, although we had never met. But he stated in his letter that when he was released from the service, he wanted to build a theater in a small town near San Diego, and would I design same. We corresponded with each other for a long time, and eventually, we built the theater. To this day, he is probably one of my closest friends.

On one occasion, Max Reinhardt, who during his producing years was considered one of the outstanding producers of the theater, came to Los Angeles to see me. While he had no property for his idea, he wanted me to make preliminary designs for a theater with a stage that would





provide for live shows to have all the characteristics of a motion picture. For example, if an actor stepped from a room to the outside, he wanted by a quick change process to show the man going through the door and coming out the other side. I worked on this stage system for quite some time and did develop the idea, but it would take such a large piece of property for the stage arrangement that it seemed impractical for any close-in theater. Construction would have to be built on inexpensive property, which means quite a distance from the center of town.

In the 1940s, I designed two temples, one the Temple Israel on Hollywood Boulevard, and the other was Temple Emmanuel on Santa Monica Boulevard. This property was later condemned by the state to build a freeway, which was later abandoned.

About the year 1948 or '47, I designed a new house for myself close to the Trousdale Estates. The house was out for bids when a real estate agent took me to Loma Linda to see the last lots offered by the Rodeo Land and Water Company, the original subdividers of Beverly Hills. I was so impressed with the lot that I sold the one where I had the plans out and bought this one. I then built 1177 Loma Linda Drive, in which I introduced some novelties, some of which have been copied, and others have not. The description of this house and its construction features are on a separate sheet of paper.



\*[The house was designed and built by S. Charles Lee in 1948. The foundation is flat slab on grade, and the floor is built in two levels of concrete, separated by metal domes which leave an air space between the two layers of concrete. Into this air space a fan drives either hot or cold air under the floor, and when heating is required, this space or plenum chamber, as it is technically called, leads to registers which are built near the floor in all the rooms, so that the floor takes on the temperature required. The rooms are either heated or cooled by the air pumped through the plenum.

The roof of the house is pumice concrete, poured over felt and reinforced. The roof has never had a leak.

The inside of the house is plastered with pumice plaster, instead of standard sand plaster. This is for insulation and sound proofing. The windows in the bedroom do not open, because we want to keep the room dark in the morning. The wall underneath the windows does open and has two layers of screens and is covered by louvers on the outside.

The house was built in two different eras. The first unit, built in 1948, is the main house, and the second

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\*The contents of the sheet of paper have been bracketed in at this point in the transcript.



unit, built in 1958, is the Lanai Room and the Trophy Room, which overhangs the lake. The lake was also built in 1958. Prior to that, the house had only the swimming pool. The lake was originally built as the swimming pool for my grandchildren and had an electric operated boat and a pier. For the last six years I have been raising koi in this pond and it is now operated with thirteen filters.

It is very difficult to keep the water at the right consistency for the raising of koi fish. These fish are raised chiefly in Japan, although they had been originated in the Middle East. You show the fish like dogs or horses in shows, some of which are in Japan, some in the United States. They are very difficult to judge, and the judges are usually licensed judges from Japan.

They win various prizes, some of which can be seen in the Lanai Room, and when they become 'Champion Over-All' they are extremely valuable, up to \$135,000.00 for one fish. I do not have any fish that expensive in my pond, although I do have several winners in the lower areas of the competition.

The lot was the last property sold by the original subdividers, the Rodeo Land & Water Company, who put in the streets in 1923 and sold in 1948.]

In 1952, the County of Los Angeles gave me a contract to design the Compton Courthouse. It was in a small town at that time and not too important a project.



### THIRD PART

MARCH 31, 1986

LEE: March 31, 1986, Maggie Valentine interviewing S. Charles Lee at his office in Beverly Hills. About the years 1947, television began to come on very strong and television sets were purchased in large numbers, which were cutting into the box office of the motion picture theaters, and the demand for new theaters was practically nil. As I had put practically all of my eggs in the theatrical basket, I felt it was necessary for me to look around for another method of developing a practice. In doing so, my accountant introduced me to another client of his who was thinking about purchasing the one hundred acres [tape recorder off] on Century Boulevard for some kind of a development. But he felt the program was too large for him, and he was looking for a partner. One day after meeting with this gentleman, whose name was [Samuel] Hayden, I was convinced that we could develop a viable program and put up my check for a one-half interest in the purchase. We planned the subdivision of the property for industrial purposes, and I put in the streets, off site and undergrounds. We offered the property for sale, but after six or seven months could not get buyers for the raw property.





I came up with the idea of developing an industrial FHA [Federal Housing Administration], which meant we would build factories and sell them to users, not speculators, on a basis of 10 or 20 percent down and the balance over a hundred and eleven months at 6 percent interest. In those days, we were borrowing money from the bank at 4 percent. I set up a drafting room in our offices on the property and put up several demonstration buildings, which we not only designed, but built with our own forces. The proposition took hold almost immediately, and the buildings began to sell. Mr. Hayden took care of all financial matters, while I took charge of all the technical details, starting with writing letters, to building the buildings, and all legal matters connected with it. The formula of an industrial FHA became so popular that the government issued a monograph which they distributed throughout the United States as a successful approach to industrial development. The raw property cost us approximately fifteen cents a square foot, and now, 1986, the bank appraises the property at seventy dollars a square foot. Not much is left, and in 1985, we sixty-five-year-leased a large parcel to build the Stouffers [Concourse] Hotel.

When I launched the partnership with Hayden, I decided that I could no longer accept any architectural commitments and serve two masters. I took the point of view that if it



was not successful as a development, I would go back into the practice of architecture, providing I had not jeopardized my reputation by giving inferior service. While I kept my office on Wilshire Boulevard with a secretary as a back-up, I made my principal office at the airport site, where I had an active drafting room for our own buildings. I built approximately a hundred and fifty factories on that site, and I began developing the theory of renting as many buildings as possible, while Mr. Hayden's idea was to liquidate as many buildings as possible. We were successful in attracting the Hughes Aircraft Company and at one time had them as tenants in seventeen buildings.

As Mr. Hayden was fifteen years my senior, he decided at one time he wanted to retire, and as we were on the best of friendly relations, we divided the assets equally, either in cash, land, or buildings. From that time on, as far as my share was concerned, I decided not to sell any of the property, but to lease same, which proved to be a sound idea. As our property built up at the airport, we decided to build a new office at 258 South Beverly Drive, which we occupied until Mr. Hayden retired and I acquired the property as part of my half interest. On the subject of offices: during the early thirties, business was so weak that my rent on Seventh Street became a great burden. I



decided that the first opportunity that I would collect any substantial fees, I would acquire my own land and building. About 1935, I became very busy with the various projects on Highland Avenue, and I sent an agent to buy me the cheapest property on Wilshire Boulevard. At that time, the agent came up with a house that was fifty or sixty years old at 1648-50 Wilshire Boulevard. Wilshire Boulevard had just been widened. The street bonds on the property were approximately \$6,000, and I believe I gave \$3,000 for the equity and then proceeded to build my office on the property. There was a bank of about four feet high above the sidewalk, and the house stood on top of this bank. I moved the house to the back portion of the lot, stopping about twenty-five feet from the alley. I dug out from underneath the house, and the front portion I made into a store, with a stairway going up to the second floor, which actually became the third floor, as the first floor of the house became a mezzanine. Then the second floor of the house was the level of my office, the first floor becoming a store. Later years, I needed more room and built the last twenty-five feet onto the house, and my drafting room ran back to the end of the alley. I used this office for approximately twenty-five or thirty years, until moving to the airport, and then used it as a commercial rental. It has paid for itself so many times I can't even calculate.



The property behind it ran to the corner of Little Street and had a small house on it occupied by two elderly ladies, one of which was in a wheelchair. I believe they were sisters. From time to time, when I would see them trying to take the wheelchair down the few steps from the floor to the sidewalk, I used to carry the wheelchair down for them. One day they came to my office and had a proposition, which was they would like to give me their property, providing I would pay them a sum which I believe was a \$150 a month, until they both had passed away. I quickly made this deal, and we both lived up to our end of the bargain. This is now an auto park and a very valuable adjunct to the property on Wilshire Boulevard, from which I have now refused a quarter of a million dollars. In fact, the property is not for sale. I remember telling my wife that if I had this property and ever ran into another depression, we would move in to same, living in the part between the store and the second floor, and I would still be in business in the drafting room.

#### FOURTH PART

MAY 19, 1986

LEE: This is May 19, 1986, Maggie Valentine interviewing S. Charles Lee in his office at 258 South Beverly Drive, Beverly Hills. Some of the following notes are





miscellaneous items come to mind that are not in chronological order and probably should be inserted in the proper sequence. Approximately 1924, apartments were practically impossible to rent unless they were dropped below the economic value. A friend of mine who was a builder offered me a duplex at 6206-8 West Sixth Street on which he could not pay the taxes, due to the low rent. As near as I can recall, he was about to lose the property for four or five hundred dollars in delinquent taxes and payments on a mortgage of approximately five or six thousand dollars. I believe I gave him one thousand dollars for his position and paid up the delinquencies, and have had this duplex in the family ever since. It has always come in handy and some of the history is as follows: My early secretary and her sister needed a place to live, and I gave it to them. Later their mother had a housing complication, and the sisters moved out and their mother moved in. The mother lived there until she died, and my mother's sister, my aunt, needed a place to live, so we gave it to her. After I lost my house to the mortgage company, my wife and I moved into the apartment, and when the necessity arose, I moved out and my daughter and her husband moved in. During the war years, it was against the law to eject a tenant unless the owner is going to occupy the premises. A friend of mine had a critical situation of



needing a place for his mother. I agreed to sell him a one-half interest under the condition that when his mother moved out or he no longer needed it, he would sell it back to me. I did sell him a one-half interest, properly documented, and his mother lived in the apartment till she died. He then installed his aunt, who lived in the apartment until this aunt died. He then sold the unit back to me. I traded the building for an airplane, subsequently sold the airplane, and bought back the unit. Now my grandson occupies half of the building, and a friend of his occupies the other half. At the present time, the units are selling in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand dollars on that street. Of course, it is not for sale, as many years ago I gave it to my daughter as a Christmas present.

During the time that Hayden Lee was building the airport tract, the Hughes Aircraft Company asked us to build them a building of 75,000 square feet, which they agreed to lease for a period of two years. We told them that such a proposal was unsound for us, and they then agreed to lease the project for five years. It still was very difficult for us to finance and pay off after taxes on a five-year lease. Our attorneys determined that the only way this could be done would be in partnership with a foreign corporation. Remembering my old Panamanian friend,



I visited him, and we joined forces with a Panamanian corporation that under the tax laws then in effect made the project financeable. Eventually, we acquired a major interest in that corporation.



TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

MAY 19, 1986

LEE: However, in doing so, the tax status of the corporation was changed, and it was necessary that we find another business to go into, because the Hughes Aircraft extended their lease for another five years, and the corporation was in an untenable tax position.

In my search for a business opportunity, I became involved with one of the large aircraft companies and also I became involved with some very influential Japanese entrepreneurs and politicians. Subsequently, through my efforts, I was instrumental in Japan acquiring the first aircraft after the war. My name never surfaced in this connection, I did not receive any compensation, but the job was done. Indirectly, through my contacts, I was able to acquire the worldwide distribution of Canon cameras, with the exception of the United States and Japan itself.

My Panama companies became involved not only profitably, but solved, at least for the time being, our tax problems. I was also able to perform many important connections between Panama and Japan, to such an extent that Panama made me their honorary vice-consul in Beverly Hills, subsequently honoring me with the medal called a Vasco Nuñez Balboa, a presidential medal of their highest order. They also made me honorary consul in Beverly Hills in 1974.





Needing repair stations throughout the world for Canon cameras, I had offices in Geneva and Panama. We were able to bring cameras into the free zones of both countries for repairs, and ship them out without duty problems or costs. In Panama I built our own building for that purpose. The organization I created did an outstanding job of putting Canon cameras on the world market, and, eventually, the Canon Camera Company of Japan decided they would like to buy the operation from us, which they did. The companies that I created were called Canon Europe, which distributed the products throughout Europe, and Canon Latin America, which serviced Latin America. Due to the necessity of contacting our distributors, I had to travel considerably, possibly the equivalent of twenty times around the world.

During this period of time, I spent considerable time in Montevideo, Uruguay, sharing offices with the consulate, and became involved in a very large program of developing an office building and a condominium high-rise complex. Inflation was just taking off during those days, and I learned many sad lessons of economics. The prices of building materials and labor went up every day, and our sales paper kept going down in value. I knew I was facing a problem when I wanted to invest in Uruguay, that I needed some method of protecting the value of the dollar that I



moved into the country. There was one very aggressive bank in Montevideo that I checked out through the U.S. embassy and finally made a deal with them whereby I would put up dollars in a deposit, against which they would furnish me with pesos, with an agreement to exchange the pesos for dollars when I completed my program. During the construction and sales period, the peso became practically worthless against the dollar, and when I went to make the exchange, the bank failed, practically wiping out two years and many hundreds of thousands of dollars in the operation.

## SECOND PART

JUNE 12, 1986

LEE: June 12, 1986, Maggie Valentine interviewing S. Charles Lee in Beverly Hills. The International Executive Service Corps was formed as a quasi-government institution whereby mostly retired citizens were asked on a government-to-government request to lend their expertise to help, chiefly, less-developed countries. I was solicited to go to San Salvador to assist in establishing an industrial complex. This work is done without fees, except for your actual out-of-pocket expenses. I spent about a month in San Salvador, where I was faced with a most complex situation, due to the fact that there was a volcano separating various important areas of the city. I did,



however, come up with a solution to the problem and was immediately hit by a political impasse that made the project economically impractical. I gave my solution to the president and advised him to solve the financial and political impasses.

In 1926, I met a young lady visiting from New York and whom I married in 1927. There was an eye condition in this family called nystagmus. I became interested in the subject, and, doing my research, met quite a few ophthalmologists in the Los Angeles area. A group of them visited me one day and asked me to fund the starting of an eye clinic at the then Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. I did fund this clinic, and later on was approached to become a member of the board of directors of Braille Institute for the Blind. As of this date, I have served on the board for twenty-eight years, at one time was the treasurer, and am now vice-president in charge of their real estate and building programs. Having no drafting room of my own at the present time, I award the architectural contracts for schools as they are needed. I also take charge of all of their real estate, most of which is acquired through wills and bequests, and either remodel it and keep it, or remodel it and sell it, or sell it as is. Because of the efforts I have expended for Braille, I was given their Light Award in 1986, which is like the Man of the Year, except this is



awarded every second year. While on the subject of awards, I'm reminded of the fact in 1984, I was awarded the Man of the Year by the Art Deco Society, which was their first award of this type.

About the year 1948, television and radio began making great inroads into the box office of the motion picture theaters, and the demand for new theaters was practically nil. In the early fifties, I formed several companies for the purpose of building housing financed chiefly by FHA. One of our early projects was called Holly Park and principally in the town of Gardena. We purchased nine hundred acres and built some 7,500 homes, quite a few factories along Western Avenue and Crenshaw [Boulevard]. We built some 25,000 homes, principally for the Air Force, in areas like Mountain Home, Idaho; Grand Forks, North Dakota; Little Rock [Arkansas]. We built an area in Northern California which we called Los Prados. This consisted of about four hundred houses and an equal number of apartments, plus a convalescent hospital and shopping center. We sold off everything except the convalescent hospital and shopping center and, in 1985 and '86, built a senior citizens' complex connected to the convalescent hospital. We were building Los Prados at a time when Mr. [Nikita] Khrushchev of the Soviet Union was visiting Southern California. We had a twenty-four-sheet signboard





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printed in Russian that said, "Mr. Khrushchev, turn right here and see how the American worker lives." He stopped his motorcade and read the sign, but did not enter. This sign had worldwide publicity.

In 1954 our principal office was at the airport, although I still maintained my old office at 1648 Wilshire Boulevard and kept the secretary there. We decided to build a new office in Beverly Hills, purchasing the lot and building the building at 258 South Beverly Drive, which we built in partnership with a friend of Sam Hayden's, who occupied the first floor and we occupied the second, which we still occupy. We have tried to buy out the first floor, and the first-floor people have been trying to buy us. Neither one wants to sell.

To document how the property we purchased on Century Boulevard about 1948 at \$6,000 an acre, and we developed it to its present situation-- We wanted to buy back a certain parcel, because we still own a large piece behind it, and we paid over one hundred dollars a square foot. In the same block with this property, there is now being constructed the Stouffer's Concourse Hotel of seven hundred and fifty rooms, which property we have leased to the hotel for a period of sixty-five years. The hotel is scheduled to open August 4, 1986, approximately sixty days from the date of this memorandum.



In 1962, many of our portfolios were making substantial profits, and we decided to support various charities. In order to do this most efficiently, we formed the S. Charles Lee Foundation, and then all of our entities could contribute irrespective of their fiscal years, and we could distribute the money as we saw fit. This proved to be an excellent move and gave us the opportunity to contribute over a wide spectrum whenever we felt prudent to do so.

Our most substantial single contribution to date was for the S. Charles Lee Chair at UCLA, contributed in 1986. In 1985, we contributed all of our past architectural drawings and memorabilia to UCLA for their library, ably catalogued by Maggie [Martha] Valentine.

During my practice as an architect, I found the necessity for the architect to be involved in the financial concerns of the owner, and it occurred to me that too little concern was given to this part of the building business by the schools of architecture. It is my hope that the S. Charles Lee Chair will at some time address itself to projects having the commercial value of the building in mind.



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